



**BUREAU OF AUTOMOTIVE REPAIR**  
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## **On-Board Diagnostic Systems FAQ Sheet**

**Question: What is OBD?**

**Answer:** The first On-Board Diagnostic (OBD) systems were introduced in the early 1980s to lower vehicle emissions and help automotive repair technicians in the diagnosis and repair of computerized engine controls. As a result of improved technology, a new generation of OBD (OBD II) was developed and auto manufacturers are now required to incorporate this technology into their vehicles. The systems monitor components that can affect the emission performance of a vehicle to help ensure that it runs as clean as possible. If a problem is detected, the OBD system illuminates a warning light on the instrument panel inside the car to alert the driver. This warning light typically contains the phrase “**Check Engine**” or “**Service Engine Soon**”. The system also stores important information about the detected malfunction to help a repair technician find and fix the problem.

**Question: Does my vehicle have an OBD II system?**

**Answer:** 1996 and newer vehicles up to 14,000 pounds are typically equipped with OBD II systems.

**Question: What is a readiness monitor?**

**Answer:** A readiness monitor determines whether a vehicle's on-board computer has completed its check of a specific emission control device. The tests are performed on many different components while the vehicle is being driven to determine if the components are operating within allowable limits. The on-board computer cannot run some of these tests until certain driving conditions are met.

**Question: How does OBD II relate to the Smog Check Program?**

**Answer:** In addition to an analysis of tailpipe emissions, a Smog Check inspection includes a visual and functional test of required emission control systems. Since the OBD II system involves the automated self-monitoring of a vehicle's emission control systems, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) has required states to include an OBD II system test as part of the Smog Check inspection.

**Question: How do readiness monitors relate to the Smog Check Program?**

**Answer:** Part of California's Smog Check program uses the vehicle's on-board computer to determine if the vehicle is in proper working order. To make that determination, the on-board computer must complete various checks of its emission control systems. If the checks have not been completed, there may be a malfunction that the on-board computer has not yet detected. Once a malfunction is detected, the “**Check Engine**” light comes on inside the car to alert the driver there is a problem that is affecting the vehicle's emissions. Early detection of minor problems, followed by timely repair, can often prevent more costly damage to components such as the catalytic converter.



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**Question:** The Smog Check technician told me my vehicle was not ready to test because too many readiness monitors were reporting the systems checks had not been completed. What does this mean?

**Answer:** In order for the OBD system to clear the readiness monitors and complete its self-diagnostic checks, the vehicle must be driven under a variety of normal operating conditions. All of the self-diagnostic checks have not been completed if one or more readiness monitors read “not complete.” A number of factors, including emission repair work or a disconnected battery, can result in readiness monitors being set to “not complete.” In most cases, the readiness monitors can reset to “complete” very quickly, but in some cases, a few days of normal driving will be needed to do so.

**Question:** My vehicle was not ready to test because too many readiness monitors were not completed and my registration is due today. What should I do?

**Answer:** You can go to DMV, pay your registration renewal fees on time to avoid any late fees from being assessed, and apply for a temporary operating permit. Once your vehicle passes its Smog Check, you can complete the registration process and receive your license plate tags.

**Question:** Should I immediately stop my vehicle and seek help when the “Check Engine” light comes on?

**Answer:** The “Check Engine” light is intended to inform the driver of the need for service, **NOT** of the need to stop driving the vehicle. If the “Check Engine” light is on, there is a problem relating to emission control that needs to be fixed. Take the car to a repair technician as soon as possible to avoid more serious problems from occurring.

**Question:** How can I learn more about OBD?

**Answer:** Check your owner’s manual or visit the Air Resources Board’s (ARB) Web site at <http://www.arb.ca.gov/msprog/obdprog/obdfaq.htm>.